

Chapter 7  
**Description Of India**  
(1030)  
Abu'l Raihan al-Biruni

**Introduction**

At the end of the tenth century, the Sultam Mahmud of Ghazana (r. 998-1030) turned the remote, mountain-ringed capital of Ghazana into a major center of Islamic culture. Scholars and artists from all over Southwest Asia gathered at Mahmud's court. Many came willingly; others were forced to come. In 1017 Mahmud conquered the Central Asian Islamic state of Khwarazm, located west of Ghazana and just south of the Aral Sea. The conqueror brought back many of Khwarazm's intellectuals and artisans to his capital, including the Iranian scholar Abu'l Raihan al-Biruni (973 - ca.1050).

Known to subsequent generations as *al-Ustadh* (the Master), al-Biruni was primarily an astronomer, mathematician, and linguist, but his wide-ranging interests and intellect involved him in many other fields of inquiry. For thirteen years following his capture, al-Biruni served Mahmud, probably as court astrologer, and traveled with him into India's Punjab region. Here, apparently, al-Biruni spent the bulk of his period of service to Mahmud. Shortly after his lord's death in 1030, al-Biruni completed his *Description of India*, an encyclopedic account of Indian civilization, especially Hindu science. The following excerpts come from the book's opening pages, in which the author deals with the essential differences that separate Hindus from Muslims.

**Questions to Consider**

- What faults did al-Biruni see in Indian society? In contrast, what positive characteristics might he have assigned to his own society?
- According to al-Biruni, what qualities must a society possess to advance in scientific knowledge?

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***ON THE HINDUS IN GENERAL, AS AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR ACCOUNT OF THEM***

Before entering on our exposition, we must form an adequate idea of that which renders it so particularly difficult to penetrate to the essential nature of any Indian subject. The knowledge of these difficulties will either facilitate the progress of our work, or serve as an apology for any shortcomings of ours. For the reader must always bear in mind that the Hindus entirely differ from us in every respect, many a subject appearing intricate and obscure which would be perfectly clear if there were more connection between us. The barriers which separate Muslims and Hindus rest on different causes.

First, they differ from us in everything which other nations have in common. And here we first mention the language, although the difference of language also exists between other nations....

Secondly, they totally differ from us in religion, as we believe in nothing in which they believe, and *vice versa*. On the whole, there is very little disputing about theological topics among themselves; at the utmost, they fight with words, but they will never stake their soul or body or their property on religious controversy. On the contrary, all their fanaticism is directed against those who do not belong to them -- against all foreigners. They call them *mleccha*, i.e. impure, and forbid having any connection with them, be it by intermarriage or any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating, and drinking with them, because thereby, they think, they would be polluted. They consider as impure anything which

1 touches the fire and the water of a foreigner; and no household can exist without these two elements.  
2 Besides, they never desire that a thing which once has been polluted should be purified and thus  
3 recovered, as, under ordinary circumstances, if anybody or anything has become unclean, he or it would  
4 strive to regain the state of purity. They are not allowed to receive anybody who does not belong to them,  
5 even if he wished it, or was inclined to their religion. This, too, renders any connection with them quite  
6 impossible, and constitutes the widest gulf between us and them.

7  
8 In the third place, in all manners and usages they differ from us to such a degree as to frighten  
9 their children with us, with our dress, and our ways and customs, and as to declare us to be devil's breed,  
10 and our doings as the very opposite of all that is good and proper. By the way, we must confess, in order  
11 to be just, that a similar depreciation of foreigners not only prevails among us and the Hindus, but is  
12 common to all nations towards each other. I recollect a Hindu who wreaked his vengeance on us for the  
13 following reason: --

14  
15 Some Hindu king had perished at the hand of an enemy of his who had marched against him from  
16 our country. After his death there was born a child to him, which succeeded him, by the name of Sagara.  
17 On coming of age, the young man asked his mother about his father, and then she told him what had  
18 happened. Now he was inflamed with hatred, marched out of his country into the country of the enemy,  
19 and plentifully satiated his thirst of vengeance upon them. After having become tired of slaughtering, he  
20 compelled the survivors to dress in our dress, which was meant as an ignominious punishment for them.  
21 When I heard of it, I felt thankful that he was gracious enough not to compel us to Indianise ourselves and  
22 to adopt Hindu dress and manners....

23  
24 But then came Islam; the Persian empire perished, and the repugnance of the Hindus against  
25 foreigners increased more and more when the Muslims began to make their inroads into their country; for  
26 Muhammad Ibn al-Qasim entered Sind ... and conquered the cities of Bahmanwa and Mulasthana, the  
27 former of which he called *Al-mansura*, the latter *Al-mamura*. He entered India proper, and penetrated  
28 even as far as Kanauj, marched through the country of Gandhara, and on his way back, through the  
29 confines of Kashmir, sometimes fighting sword in hand, sometimes gaining his ends by treaties, leaving  
30 to the people their ancient belief, except in the case of those who wanted to become Muslims. All these  
31 events planted a deeply rooted hatred in their hearts.

32  
33 Now in the following times no Muslim conqueror passed beyond the frontier of Kabul and the  
34 river Sind until the days of the Turks, when they seized the power in Ghazna under the Samani dynasty,  
35 and the supreme power fell to the lot of Sabuktagin. This prince chose the holy war as his calling, and  
36 therefore called himself *al-Ghazi*. In the interest of his successors he constructed, in order to weaken the  
37 Indian frontier, those roads on which afterwards his son Mahmud marched into India during a period of  
38 thirty years and more. God be merciful to both father and son! Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of  
39 the country, and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust  
40 scattered in all directions, and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people. Their scattered remains  
41 cherish, of course, the most inveterate aversion towards all Muslims. This is the reason, too, why Hindu  
42 sciences have retired far away from those parts of the country conquered by us, and have fled to places  
43 which our hand cannot yet reach, to Kashmir, Benares, and other places. And there the antagonism  
44 between them and all foreigners receives more and more nourishment both from political and religious  
45 sources.

46  
47 In the fifth place, there are other causes, the mentioning of which sounds like satire --  
48 peculiarities of their national character, deeply rooted in them, but manifest to everybody. We can only  
49 say, folly is an illness for which there is no medicine, and the Hindus believe that there is no country but  
50 theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are  
51 haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited, and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that

1 which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among  
2 their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner. According to their belief, there is no  
3 other country on earth but theirs, no other race of man but theirs, and no created beings besides them have  
4 any knowledge of science whatsoever. ... If they traveled and mixed with other nations, they would soon  
5 change their mind, for their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation is. One of  
6 their scholars, Varahamihira, in a passage where he calls on the people to honor the Brahmins, says: "*The*  
7 *Greeks, though impure, must be honored, since they were trained in sciences and therein excelled others.*  
8 *What, then, are we to say of a Brahmin, if he combines with his purity the height of science?*" In former  
9 times, the Hindus used to acknowledge that the progress of science due to the Greeks is much more  
10 important than that which is due to themselves. But from this passage of Varahamihira alone you see what  
11 a self-lauding man he is, while he gives himself airs as doing justice to others....  
12

13 The heathen Greeks, before the rise of Christianity, held much the same opinions as the Hindus;  
14 their educated classes thought much the same as those of the Hindus; their common people held the same  
15 idolatrous views as those of the Hindus. Therefore I like to confront the theories of the one nation with  
16 those of the other simply on account of their close relationship, not in order to correct them. For that  
17 which is not *the truth* does not admit of any correction and all heathenism, whether Greek or Indian, is in  
18 its heart and soul one and the same belief, because it is only a deviation *from the truth*. The Greeks,  
19 however, had philosophers who, living in their country, discovered and worked out for them the elements  
20 of science, not of popular superstition, for it is the object of the upper classes to be guided by the results  
21 of science, while the common crowd will always be inclined to plunge into wrong-headed wrangling, as  
22 long as they are not kept down by fear of punishment. Think of Socrates when he opposed the crowd of  
23 his nation as to their idolatry and did not want to call the stars gods! At once eleven of the twelve judges  
24 of the Athenians agreed on a sentence of death, and Socrates died faithful to the truth.  
25

26 The Hindus had no men of this stamp both capable and willing to bring sciences to a classical  
27 perfection. Therefore you mostly find that even the so-called scientific theorems of the Hindus are in a  
28 state of utter confusion, devoid of any logical order, and in the last instance always mixed up with the  
29 silly notions of the crowd, *e.g.* immense numbers, enormous spaces of time, and all kinds of religious  
30 dogmas, which the vulgar belief does not admit of being called into question. ... I can only compare their  
31 mathematical and astronomical literature, as far as I know it, to a mixture of pearl shells and sour dates, or  
32 of pearls and dung, or of costly crystals and common pebbles. Both kinds of things are equal in their eyes,  
33 since they cannot raise themselves to the methods of a strictly scientific deduction.